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Review: Rupturing the Dialectic by Harry Cleaver

Anarcho

March 1, 2019

There is nothing worse than seeing a film labelled “inspired by true events” (or a TV series “inspired” by the stories of Philip K. Dick) for you know that any relation to actual events is purely accidental. This does not mean the film will be bad – indeed, it may be excellent (*Blade Runner* springs to mind as regards Dick adaptations). It just means that when you discover the source of the “inspiration” you realise the film does not reflect it very much, if at all.

Harry Cleaver’s new book, *Rupturing the Dialectic: The Struggle Against Work, Money, and Financialization* (AK Press, 2016), is very much like that – he claims to be inspired by Marx’s Labour Theory of Value but he crafts an analysis very much his own. This, I hasten to add, is no bad thing – but it gets distracting to see Marx constantly given credit for Cleaver’s analysis. In this, it follows his most famous book, *Reading Capital Politically* (AK Press, 2015), and like that work, this book inspires the same question – if Marx had meant all the various ideas and arguments which Cleaver ex-

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tracts from his words then why did it need Cleaver to write his book to show it?

In short, if that was what Marx “really” meant then he would have written all that in the first place and we would not be dependent on someone else to make it explicit. So, for Cleaver, Marx’s analysis is rooted in the imposition of work by capital – or, at least, attempts by capital to impose said on the proletariat. As a result, he rejects those who suggest Marx was working in the Labour Theory of Value (LTV) tradition of the classical economics (Smith, Ricardo). That Marx took the LTV as involving a commodity having some kind of “congealed” labour in it rather than the imposition of work is, I think, clear from his writings. This is particularly obvious when considering his comments and examples on the “transformation” of labour-values into prices contained in volume 3 of *Capital*, but it appears in elsewhere in *Capital* – particularly volume 1.

Simply put, if Cleaver were right then Marx would not have bothered with the so-called “transformation problem.” It would have been irrelevant to show how labour-values transformed into prices, for the imposition of labour by capital is not reflected in the exchange-value of commodities denominated by labour-time. Ultimately, there is a reason why most Marxists have interpreted Marx as they have – for if Marx had meant what Cleaver says he did then he would have said so in *Capital*. This does not mean that his analysis is not without merit, just that its barely counts as “Marxist” if, by that word, we mean consistent with Marx’s expressed ideas.

Which raises another question, namely the status of Cleaver’s brand of Marxism. Cleaver is America’s most famous Autonomist Marxist, a branch of Marxism which primarily developed within Italian Marxist circles between the 1950s and 1970s (see Steve Wright’s *Storming heaven : class composition and struggle in Italian autonomist Marxism* [Pluto Press, 2017] for a good history and overview). This *operaismo* (workerism) concentrated on the class struggle, a position – like the name (*ouvriérisme*) – raised decades earlier by French syndicalists who saw the worker as an active

agent who violates the mechanical laws capitalism by no longer playing the role allotted them by Capital, namely a commodity (see Émile Pouget's writings, particularly his classic 1904 pamphlet *Direct Action*). These Marxists, like the council communists before them, rejected numerous aspects of Marx's own politics – not least parliamentarianism. So how far can you move from the postulates of a theory in the face of changing circumstances, new developments, etc. before it becomes something else? If later-day Marxists draw conclusions similar to those Marx attacked when Bakunin advocated them, does – can? – it still count as Marxism?

So Cleaver's "Marxist" perspective reflects many anarchist/syndicalist ideas, indeed the most important aspect of Autonomist Marxism is the centrality of *direct* class struggle in the workings of the system. This is a welcome change from those who write as if capitalism were simply a machine, independent of human will or influence. Even the best (libertarian) Marxist writers, like Paul Mattick, expressed this vision of capital driven by its "laws" to collapse with class struggle only playing a role in *reaction* to events it cannot and does not influence. That this is the dominant perspective in almost all Marxist circles is no coincidence given Marx's writings, even if many pay lip-service to denouncing the "mechanistic" Marxism of the Second International (council communist Anton Pannekoek being a notable exception in *actually* challenging it in his 1934 article "The theory of the collapse of capitalism" [*Capital and Class*, Spring 1977]).

As such, his analysis is to be welcomed and reminds us of the importance of looking at and fighting on the class terrain. However, a key problem with the book is that he is too optimistic – everything seems to be driven by working class rebellion and so the proletariat seems all powerful. This flies in the face of the serious defeats we have suffered under neo-liberalism for decades. Indeed, reading his account of the defining power of the working class within capitalism makes you wonder what needs to happen before his optimism is dented, before he admits a defeat has occurred.

While a needed counter to the all too common “proletariat as victim” narrative on the left (reinforcing the capitalist narrative of “you can change nothing, so don’t even think about it”), it simply goes too far in the opposite direction. It could be counter-productive to real organising as a perspective inspired by this could easily conclude that revolution was always immanent so little was needed to be done (indeed, organising may be counter-productive as it could get in the way, like the bureaucracy of mainstream trade unions do). From my experiences as a worker, union rep and anarchist activist, this is hard to accept. Yes, we resist – but all too often these days this is atomised, individualistic, below-the-radar because people lack the confidence and structures to take open, collective action. When limited collective action is taken via trade unions, many cross the picket lines (even union members!) and it is unlikely, to say the least, that this is because they are disgusted at the reformist and bureaucratic nature of the current unions...

Yes, Cleaver is right to say the capitalist class is constantly planning to increase its power and profits, but he paints this as being always in response to an ever-rebellious working class. Likewise, there seems to be no room for ignorance, incompetence, idiocy or ideological dead-ends on the part of the ruling class – nor hubris or delusions. All play their part, just like developments which *do* flow from the workings of the system itself. For example, the Monetarist experiments in the early 1980s in Britain and America and the mass unemployment it massively increased undoubtedly helped to tame a rebellious working class, but we should not suggest it went exactly as planned or expected.

In short, objective *and* subjective factors are at play. Cleaver tends to downplay or ignore the former while concentrating on the latter. This means that he is right to stress that crisis can occur due to working class strength – that of the 1960s and 1970s which saw social-democratic Keynesianism come off the rails is an obvious example and one which clearly influences his analysis. He is wrong not to suggest that crisis can occur due to working class weakness

– as shown by the 2008 financial crisis and its extremely slow path to “recovery.” But, then, working class weakness seems excluded by definition from his analysis.

To conclude, Cleaver’s book is well-worth reading as it emphasises the role of the working class in the workings of the system, even if marred by excessive optimism. He may build upon Marx’s analysis (I’ll leave the Marxists to fight over that), but we must remember that it is his own ideas rather than Marx’s which fill the bulk of the book. As an autonomist, he would be better served expressing his autonomy from Marx and being less modest.